

PRESSURES FOR REUNIFICATION

The Geneva agreements of 1954, which ended the long Indochinese war, gave far less to the Vietnamese Communists than even their most pessimistic supporters could have expected. After a struggle in which they had unquestionably defeated their opponents, and despite the great military victory of Dienbienphu, the Communists were granted control over only the northern half of Vietnam and were obliged to accept the presence of an International Control Commission on their territory. In signing the agreements they were forced to bow to strong Soviet pressure, a fact that robbed them of much prestige at home, and the only face-saving concession made to them was the unsigned "Declaration of Intention," which prescribed national elections for the reunification of Vietnam, to be held not later than July 1956. The worthlessness of this concession can be seen in a remark made by the Communist North Vietnam (DRV) ^{1/} Prime Minister, Pham Van Dong, to one of my Vietnamese friends immediately after the signing of the agreements. When asked which side he thought would win the elections, Dong replied, "You know as well as I do that there won't be any elections."

DRV policy following the Geneva agreements was to consolidate the Communist position in North Vietnam while waiting for the South to collapse under the weight of its own serious internal dissensions. But, contrary to all expectations, Ngo Dinh Diem overcame the difficulties besetting his government, and it was South Vietnam, not North Vietnam, which began to make rapid progress. North Vietnam sustained grave setbacks, the most important of which was the failure of its agrarian reform campaign. South Vietnam's success was due in very large measure to the massive aid that she received from the United States, a fact that led North Vietnam to regard the United States as her principal enemy and the most serious threat to her security.

As no national elections were held in Vietnam during 1956, the "Declaration of Intention" became a dead letter, and the two halves of the country remained divided. In consequence, the Vietnamese Communists lost their earlier reputation for invincibility and found that they had to contend with the continuing existence of a rival Vietnamese government which constituted an ever-present threat to the authority of their regime in North Vietnam. They employed subversion inside South Vietnam in an attempt to overthrow the government of President Ngo Dinh Diem and to replace it with another less likely to resist Communist pressures, but their efforts met with little success. Once again it was American support and aid that enabled President Diem to resist Communist attempts to undermine his regime. During the latter half of 1959 the Communists changed their tactics in the South

^{1/} Since Communist North Vietnam calls itself the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, it is commonly referred to by the initials DRV; for the sake of brevity that usage is employed hereafter in the text.

and resorted to sabotage, murder, and armed insurrection. As more and more Communist guerrillas were infiltrated from the North, the scale and extent of armed resistance increased and the threat to President Diem's government became greater. Again the United States came to the assistance of South Vietnam with military instructors and equipment, later adding airplanes and helicopters flown by American pilots. The struggle still continues, and each new Communist effort is matched with such United States aid as is necessary to check and overcome it.

Thus the Communist leadership of North Vietnam has lost a great measure of its earlier ascendancy because of the failure to reunify the country, is faced by a rival government in South Vietnam which has defied Communist efforts to overthrow it since 1954, and in its struggle to annex South Vietnam finds itself thwarted by United States aid to President Diem. For these reasons its situation bears a close resemblance to that of the Chinese Communist leadership which has been unable to annex Formosa and dispose of the rival Chinese government of Chiang Kai-shek because of American support for the latter. ...

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So long as Diem remained in office there could be no hope that trade relations would be opened with the South or that Northern coal might be bartered for Southern rice. North Vietnam had to overcome her shortage of food by herself without help from the South, and all signs were that this state of affairs would persist indefinitely. Moreover, China was desperately short of food, and agricultural difficulties were chronic throughout the Communist bloc. It was therefore decided that North Vietnam should press forward with a rapid and large-scale program of industrialization.

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The war in South Vietnam was a further source of disquiet, for the DRV committal of greater forces in the South had resulted only in increased American determination to defend the government of President Ngo Dinh Diem. More and more United States troops were sent to South Vietnam, and their participation in the fighting was steadily becoming more direct. Prospects of a quick military victory there, and access to South Vietnam's rice surplus had vanished. Instead of providing a solution to North Vietnam's economic problems the adventure in South Vietnam was proving an ever-growing drain on resources and was inspiring Communist criticisms of Ho Chi Minh for causing a build-up of United States military strength in Southeast Asia.

NORTH VIETNAMESE PROBLEMS

Whatever progress was being made in the field of industrialization in North Vietnam -- and there is ample evidence that it failed to come up to expectations -- the results of the collectivization of agriculture and the imposition of a socialist pattern upon the country made it perfectly plain by 1959 that North Vietnam was showing no signs of achieving economic self-sufficiency. The demands of the North Vietnamese people were not great and did not extend to luxury goods or even to the kinds of consumer goods considered necessities in the more advanced bloc countries. Nevertheless, they required food and clothing, peasants could not work in the fields unless they were enabled to replace worn-out implements, and households demanded a basic minimum of domestic utensils for cooking and eating. It was proving impossible to satisfy even these modest demands, and the major problem was food.

Ho Chi Minh had never entertained any hopes of being able to conclude satisfactory agreements concerning the reunification of Vietnam with President Ngo Dinh Diem, but he clearly hoped -- and not without good grounds -- that Diem's regime would be overthrown and replaced by a government which would prove more amenable. The first requirement of North Vietnam from South Vietnam was food, for North Vietnam had long been a food-deficit area. By 1959 it had become obvious that, thanks to generous United States aid, President Diem had consolidated his position and had effectively silenced most of the opposition to his regime, and that North Vietnam was not going to obtain any of South Vietnam's food surplus in the foreseeable future unless new methods were adopted. Moreover, hopes of acquiring food from other bloc countries were nonexistent, for agriculture has always been the weakest point of communism, and no bloc country had any surplus for export to North Vietnam.

The desperate and increasing food shortage led the DRV leadership to decide -- probably at the meeting of the Central Committee of the Lao Dong Party held in May 1959 -- to change its tactics toward South Vietnam and to revert to the technique of the "people's war" that had served so well during the war against France.^{10/} By using this technique, in which the Vietnamese Communists are the most skillful and experienced practitioners in the world, they hoped to subvert the government of South Vietnam and procure its overthrow while not ostensibly engaging in warfare against that state. The decision was not without risks for both North Vietnam and the entire Communist bloc, but doubtless Ho Chi Minh had discussed the matter with Soviet leaders during his visit to Moscow to attend the Twenty-First Congress of the CPSU and with the Chinese leaders during his stopover in Peking. Thus by the middle of 1959 North Vietnam was committed to the waging of an armed struggle in South Vietnam the objective of which was the overthrow of President Ngo Dinh Diem's regime.

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^{10/} For an excellent description of this type of warfare see George K. Tanham, *Communist Revolutionary Warfare* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1962).

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THE WAR IN SOUTH VIETNAM

The growing necessity for North Vietnam to acquire by one means or another some of South Vietnam's rice surplus was underlined by the customary reviews of progress during the past year made at the beginning of 1962. The extent of North Vietnam's failure to overcome the shortage of food is vividly illustrated by a comparison of figures provided by Nguyen Duy Trinh, Chairman of the State Planning Commission. In his report to the National Assembly on April 14, 1961 he announced that rice production during the year would amount to 5.5 million tons, but when he reported on production achievements for the year on January 7, 1962 he stated, "We have harvested 4.6 million tons of rice," and there is reason to believe even this figure was exaggerated. At about the same time a despondent newspaper article declared categorically that North Vietnam would never be able to produce sufficient rice to feed the constantly increasing population and counseled people to accustom themselves to doing without rice and to live on other foods. ^{62/}

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United States help to the South Vietnamese authorities greatly exceeded the expectations of the DRV leaders, and the Communist insurgents in the South were making little progress toward the attainment of their objectives. The establishment of a United States military command in South Vietnam was described as a threat to the security of North Vietnam, and on February 18, 1962 the government issued a pressing appeal for the "urgent study" of the situation in South Vietnam.

A bombshell was exploded in mid-May 1962 when the International Control Commission reported to the Co-Chairmen of the Geneva Conference that North Vietnam had contravened the 1954 Geneva agreements by her participation in the South Vietnamese war. Since the Polish element of the ICC has always kept North Vietnam well informed about current Commission business, North Vietnam was aware that the report was in preparation and exerted every effort to prevent it; but the best it could manage was to persuade the Polish element to dissociate itself from the findings and to issue its own minority report, which did little to minimize the effects of the document. 68/

The North Vietnamese authorities, fully aware of the danger to their position if it was universally accepted that they were participating directly in the South Vietnamese war, issued frenzied denunciations and denials. North Vietnam attacked the ICC report, the ICC itself, the legality of its action, and so on. From mid-May onward radio broadcasts and newspapers could speak of little else, while mass meetings were organized throughout the whole of North Vietnam and millions of signatures appeared on petitions of protest. It was against the Indian Chairman of the ICC, G. Parthasarathi, that the main weight of the attack was directed, for he not only bore the principal responsibility for the report but had appended a final statement rejecting the Polish minority report. Every crime in the Communist book was attributed to India in general and Mr. Parthasarathi in particular until observers wondered where it would all end.

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Agreements signed at Geneva in July ended the war in Laos and established her as a "neutral" country, which required the withdrawal of all foreign troops and her abandonment of SEATO protection. This solution appears to have pleased the Communist bloc as a whole -- and there were good reasons for their satisfaction, for subsequent developments have showed that the agreement was a serious mistake on the part of the Western powers --

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However, there is much evidence to suggest that North Vietnam was deeply impressed both by the report of the ICC condemning her actions in South Vietnam and by the agreement reached over Laos at Geneva. The first underlined the dangers attendant upon supplying unlimited support to the Communist insurgents; yet without growing support it would plainly be impossible for these insurgents to campaign successfully against the South Vietnamese forces increasingly strengthened by United States military assistance. The Laotian settlement was eminently satisfactory for the Communists in that it had secured the withdrawal of United States military personnel and had robbed SEATO of any pretext for

interfering in Laotian internal affairs when the Pathet Lao Communists made their bid to assume full control of that country.

If similar agreements could be reached over South Vietnam, then a DRV victory would be virtually assured, for the United States soldiers would have to be withdrawn and could not return thereafter in the guise of SEATO forces. Better still, a neutral zone might be negotiated to cover Laos, South Vietnam, and Cambodia. Later on possibly Thailand and Burma might be added to it. Settlements of this kind would get rid of the only element capable of resisting Communist expansion -- the United States -- and the neutrality of the countries concerned could easily be left intact until the moment was judged opportune for their annexation, one by one, by the Communist bloc.

For the North Vietnamese leaders the prospect of a neutral South Vietnam had an added attraction. Since the latter could no longer object to trade with North Vietnam, South Vietnamese rice could be acquired, and the desperate food shortage in the North ended. During the latter part of 1962 and the early months of 1963, DRV propaganda campaigns appeared to be directed more toward extolling the advantages of a neutral South Vietnam than toward increasing the scale of insurgent military operations there. This propaganda urged the United States to withdraw and to allow the South Vietnamese to live in peace and neutrality; simultaneously it accorded maximum publicity to American "atrocities," laying particular stress upon the chemical defoliants being used and their allegedly terrible effects upon human beings and animals.

Nevertheless, military struggle continued unabated, for North Vietnam appeared to be convinced by the arguments she had advanced about the Laotian settlement. Negotiation leading to eventual neutrality, if it were to prove successful, had to be preceded by victorious armed struggle. Indeed, the struggle in South Vietnam might well have to be prolonged before the climate was ripe for negotiation because North Vietnam would demand greater concessions from an international conference than the Laotian Communists had done. Since Ho Chi Minh was anxious to negotiate neutrality only for South Vietnam and had no intention of removing the North from the Communist bloc, it would be necessary to induce in the United States a greater degree of weariness with the war and of frustration before she would agree to his demands. Consequently DRV exhortations to the insurgents in South Vietnam began to place increasing emphasis upon the long drawn out nature of the struggle and the impossibility of a quick victory.

Every other internal problem of North Vietnam has paled into insignificance beside the disastrous agricultural situation. It is difficult to see how famine on a national scale can be averted, for no country in the Communist bloc is in a position to send supplies of rice to North Vietnam, and offers of help from the West would almost certainly be refused for political reasons.

With each passing year the internal situation in North Vietnam becomes increasingly difficult. Certainly industrialization is going on with aid supplied by the rest of the bloc, but progress has been disappointingly slow, and in the last resort all else depends upon the ability of the North Vietnamese people to feed themselves.

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For all these reasons it has become more and more imperative for the leaders of North Vietnam to find some solution to their immediate economic problems and to find it quickly. The armed insurrection in South Vietnam has shown no prospects of success in the foreseeable future, and for some months North Vietnam has been calling for the setting up of a neutral state in South Vietnam. This might well delay Communist annexation of South Vietnam, but it would offer the advantage of immediate trading relations between the Northern and Southern zones so that North Vietnam could purchase Southern rice. The major obstacle standing in the way of such a solution is North Vietnam's insistence that neutral status should apply only to South Vietnam and not to herself. Even if the government of President Ngo Dinh Diem should be replaced, no representative government of South Vietnam would be likely to agree to such unequal terms.

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The situation of the DRV has grown extremely precarious, for, although no formal break has yet come about between China and the Soviet Union, Ho Chi Minh has been faced with the necessity of making a choice between the two which even he, consummate politician though he is, could not escape. Since all states were invited to sign the partial nuclear test ban treaty, the DRV was obliged to state publicly whether she would or would not sign. No evasion was possible, nor was there any room for doubt that, in the case of Communist states, to sign was to align oneself with the Soviet Union and to refuse was to take the side of China. North Vietnam has now publicly refused to sign.

By this action she has bowed to the inevitable and aligned herself with China. Doubtless if the opportunity were to arise, the DRV would once again seek to regain her earlier position of neutrality, but the possibilities for so doing appear daily more remote as a formal break between the Communist giants becomes imminent. Moreover, by her refusal to sign the treaty the DRV has committed so grievous an affront to the Soviet Union that it is questionable whether she can ever again restore her former relationship with that country.

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Under these circumstances it is well within the bounds of possibility that the Soviet Union will decide to withdraw her own and East European technicians from North Vietnam, leaving DRV industrial development at a standstill. Should the Soviets do so, the plight of North Vietnam would become grave.